

LITTLE BLUE BOOK NO.
Edited by E. Haldeman-Julius

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Pagan Christs

Joseph McCabe

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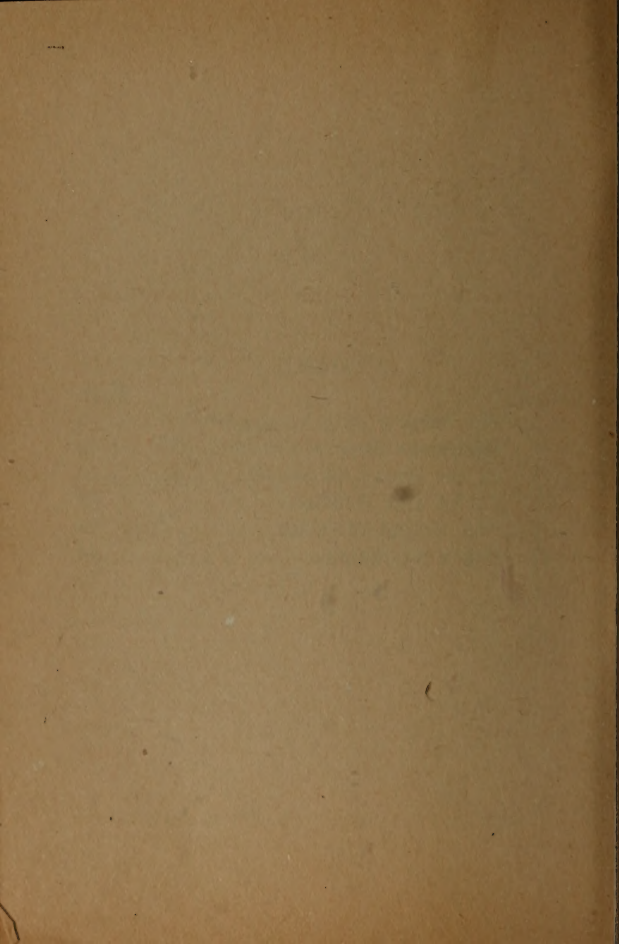
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PAGAN CHRISTS

CHAPTER I

THE MYTH OF THE VIRGIN BIRTH

Christianity has dominated the imagination of half the race during the last fifteen centuries by means of two entirely different symbols. One is the crucifix: the somber reminder of sin and repentance, of lurid flames and atoning blood, of the call to stifle the most thrilling impulses of our nature. The other is the manger: the cradle of the new-born divine babe, the emblem of joy and warmth and generosity, the excuse to let the poor heart follow its impulses.

The Christian religion in its original form was compelled to compromise with human nature. In Paul, the one sure witness to its beliefs in the half century after Christ, it is an entirely joyless creed. Even the resurrection is hailed only with a sigh of relief; because hell is less certain than it would otherwise have been. The Epistles, which reflect the earliest Christian community, are a dirge. The scarlet letter, Sin, is branded on every fair part of human nature. Flowers do not exist. Wine is a medicine.

Such a religion would have appealed to a few hundred thousand in the Greco-Roman world. We shall see in the last chapter that there were in it a dozen, a score, of such re-

ligions. But Christian priests were ambitious, and they compromised. The birth of Christ was discovered to be an occasion for joy. The virgin and child were raised to the altar. Puritans groaned; but the world had to be won, and only thus could it be won.

Protestantism, in the sixteenth century, frowned upon the virgin, and once more made the cross the sole emblem of Christianity. And once more religion was forced to compromise. In the land of Luther Christmas is celebrated with enthusiasm: Good Friday is tolerated. In Protestant Britain Christmas is immeasurably the greatest festival of life: on Good Friday men go about their work as usual. America has felt the blight of Puritanism more deeply, and the heart has had its revenge in other ways; yet even to the American Fundamentalists, the lineal descendant of the Puritan Father, the supreme dogma of the faith is that the God of the universe was incarnated in the womb of a Jewish maid.

And there are few doctrines of the Christian faith so vulnerable, so slight in their foundations, as this of the virgin-birth of Jesus. It is the feeblest statement about Jesus in the whole of the Gospels. It is unknown to Paul. It grows under our eyes in the New Testament. And from end to end of the Greco-Roman world, in which the books of the New Testament were gradually evolved, we find the mythical material which is successively wrought into the familiar story.

Let us first examine the story in the Gospels. The earliest Christian writings, we saw

in another volume, are Paul's Epistles. Paul insists that Jesus was "born of a woman"; but who the woman was he cares not the toss of a coin, and he knows of no miracle in the conception.

The next writing, chronologically, is the Gospel of *Mark*. As we have it, there is no proof that it existed within forty years of the death of Christ; yet it is ignorant of the tremendous miracle of the virgin birth. Jesus, in *Mark*, enters history, becomes more than an ordinary man, at the age of thirty. Apparently the original *Mark* was just a description of a singularly gifted prophet who was called by God, or converted by John, in his early manhood.

Matthew, the next Gospel, also seems in its original form to have known nothing unusual about the birth of Jesus. The first two chapters are an afterthought. The Gospel really begins, at the third chapter, as that of *Mark* does. Then someone prefaced it with one of the two genealogies of Jesus that were in circulation (i, 1-17). Next—the new beginning is quite clear—somebody added a short account of how Jesus was born (i, 18-25). Lastly some other hand added the legends of Ch. II with which we will deal later.

Luke, a later Gospel, has a much more developed version of the conception and the birth. How, by the way, we have come to speak, as we always do, about the "virgin birth" or "miraculous birth," I do not know. It is the conception, not the birth, that is held to have been miraculous. The practice has misled more

than one Rationalist into thinking that the "immaculate conception" of Mary—that is to say, the conception of Mary *by her mother*—is the same thing as the virgin birth of Jesus.

However, let us look closely at this late story given in *Luke*. Strange, isn't it, that Mary and Elizabeth and Zacharias had such remarkable experiences, and kept them such a dead secret that Paul and Mark never heard of them! One desperate and learned divine, Professor Sanday, suggests that Mary, late in life, confided these things (including, I suppose, the very words of the long impromptu poem she composed) to a lady friend, and she, late in life, confided them to the writer of *Luke*. But Professor Sanday forgets to explain the long secrecy. Four times in the New Testament the brothers of Jesus are mentioned, yet Mary is supposed to have known that he had none. Joseph knew it still better. For some mysterious reason the great events of Chs. I and II, which would have converted half of Galilee, had to remain a family secret until the end of the century.

Well, let us try again. We are first told that a priest named Zacharias had a barren wife, and "an angel of the Lord" appeared and told him that his wife would have a son. This son is to be "great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink"; and then the angel went and said much the same to Mary, except that her son was to be fatherless.

Now, divines very delicately avoid bringing to the notice of their readers another passage

of the Bible which I will here reproduce. It is many centuries older than *Luke*—it is in *Judges*, Ch. XIII—and is really interesting:

2. And there was a certain man of Zorah . . . and his wife was barren and bare not.

3. And the angel of the Lord appeared unto the woman, and said unto her: Behold, now thou art barren, and bearest not; but thou shalt conceive and bear a son.

4. Now, therefore, beware, I pray thee, and drink not wine nor strong drink, and eat not any unclean thing;

5. For, lo, thou shalt conceive and bear a son; and no razor shall come on his head; for the child shall be a Nazarite unto God from the womb.

Rather suggestive, isn't it?

However, the angel tells Mary that she will conceive. As she is engaged to be married, this should not be a very startling announcement; but Mary is troubled and expostulates that she "knows no man." We might leniently suppose that the angel had a cold, and that Mary understood him to say that she had already conceived. But the oldest Latin manuscript of *Luke* has not the words: "How can this be: I know no man." Somebody, still later, has tampered with *Luke* and put in a stupid interpolation. And the source of the interpolation is known. An apocryphal gospel of the second century describes Mary as vowed to virginity for life, not engaged to Joseph; and such virgins sometimes observe their vows.

Next we are told that "these things were noised abroad through all the hill country of Judea," and created an enormous sensation. But apparently everybody forgot all about them.

again, when Jesus was a boy, and the secret was only let out a hundred years later. The other inspired writer makes Mary herself and her sons think of putting Jesus under restraint on the ground that his mind became deranged by his idea of a mission! So Mary also had forgotten it, temporarily.

However, the birth-time arrived; and it was a very romantic birth, in the manger of a stable. You see, the Old Testament had predicted that the Messiah was to be of "the seed of David"; as the Pharisees are made to remind Jesus in the Gospels. The poor Gospel writers here were in a dilemma. Mary, being related to the priest's wife, was presumably of the house of Aaron, not David, yet they had to bring in David. So they made Davidic genealogies—which seems to have been unknown to Jesus when the Pharisees wanted his pedigree—for Joseph; and, after all, Joseph was the father of Jesus in every sense except one—his seed.

Then, since the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, as the Old Testament said, *Luke* explains. The Emperor Augustus decreed that "all the world should be taxed," and each man was to go, with his family, to the city of his fathers. This meant a journey of eighty miles for the poor carpenter and his bearing wife; and, since every family in Judea had to do this musical-choir's performance, and get to the city of his ancestor of a thousand years earlier, Judea must have presented a highly interesting spectacle. The most practical Government of ancient times, the Roman, is supposed to have

ordered this piece of lunacy, through the Governor Cyrenius. But we learn from the historian Josephus that what Cyrenius really did was a very much smaller matter, and that it was done in the year 6 A. D., or ten years *after* the birth of Jesus. Moreover, northern Palestine was not under Cyrenius, but under the independent prince Herod Antipas; and the Jews had so little in the way of tax-registers that in the year 66 A. D. they had to calculate the population from the number of paschal lambs.

No Gospel says that Jesus was born in winter. The snow-that-lay-on-the-ground is an artistic addition of a much later age. But the journey to Bethlehem and the manger have now melted away like the snow. Jesus was presumably, as *Mark* intimates, born in Nazareth in the usual prosy way. His genealogy in *Matthew* ends, in the oldest Syriac version of the Gospel, with the plump statement, "And Joseph begat Jesus."

But *Luke's* fairy tales are not yet over. There were more miracles, which the shepherds "made known abroad"; and everybody forgot in a few years. Then the incarnate God submitted to the delicate operation known politely as circumcision; and there were more miracles. Yet, when this wonderful being, at the age of twelve, showed signs of precocious wisdom, his father and mother "were amazed" (ii, 48) and they nearly went so far as to "box his ears."

Matthew—to turn to him for a moment—tells us of other wonders. A miraculous star

brought three wise men from the east to Judea. How the star moved along in such a way as to guide them, and why it ceased to guide them any longer when they got to Judea (and so caused the murder of thousands of innocent babes), we are not told. This story makes its first appearance about the year 119 A. D., and in Rome; and, curiously enough, three wise men had in 66 A. D. been brought to Rome from the east to worship the Emperor! As to the star, had not the inspired Balaam predicted: "There shall come forth a star out of Jacob" (*Numbers xxiv, 17*)?

Next *Matthew* tells us the tallest story in the whole of this tissue of legends. These wise men, led by a star which nobody sees but themselves, and which moves in such a way as to guide them across country—one apologist suggests that it was a meteorite (which moves at the rate of about a hundred miles a second!)—arrive at Jerusalem and lose the scent. The divine guidance then acts in a way which certainly perplexes the mere human mind. The sages are moved to go and tell King Herod that a new "King of the Jews" has been born somewhere; and Herod, in a fury, and believing the statement with childish credulity, orders the murder of all the children in Bethlehem and the entire region under the age of two and a half years. The little Almighty is taken, presumably on donkeyback, hundreds of miles across the desert, to get out of the way, and let the innocent suffer. Miracles and apparitions crowd the narrative; but the simple

miracle of changing the king's heart and sparing the children occurs to nobody.

The Christian cannot expect a non-Christian to write politely about such things as this. What we may more profitably do, however, is to remind him that just such a massacre and hiding of a child of great promise from the wrath of a king is one of the oldest themes in mythology. Turn to *Exodus* (i, 15-22):

And the King of Egypt spake to the Hebrew midwives. . . . And he said, When ye do the office of a midwife to the Hebrew women, and see them upon the stools; if it be a son, then ye shall kill him. . . .

And so Moses was (like Sargon of Babylon thousands of years before) hidden in an ark of bulrushes on the river. Herodotus, the Greek historian, tells us that King Cyrus of Persia had similarly to be hidden away at birth from a jealous king; and every Jew knew the story of Cyrus. Suetonius, the Roman historian, gives a similar legend about the birth of the Emperor Augustus. But one could fill whole pages with legends of new-born gods and mortals of great promise thus pursued by reigning monarchs, and we will return to the subject later. The wholesale "massacre" alone is peculiar to the Jesus-story; and that horrible detail is enough of itself to damn it. No Jewish writer ever heard of the horror.

Thus the wonderful story of the birth of Jesus, which grows before our eyes in the New Testament, does not appear until at least a century after the event. "What," asks the learned divine Bishop Rashdall, "would an historian make of a legend about the birth of

Napoleon which did not appear until a hundred years after the event?"

It is a tissue of ancient myths and attempts to fulfill prophecies. "Behold, a virgin (*parthenos*) shall conceive," the prophet had said, according to the Greek (and Latin and English) Old Testament; so Jesus was conceived by a virgin. The Rabbis must have smiled. In the Hebrew text the word is not "virgin" but "young girl" (Isaiah vii, 14). An angel announces the event to her; as angels had done in the Old Testament, and as the messengers of the gods were supposed in ancient Egypt to announce to queens the conception of their divine children. And Jesus is born in Bethlehem, because "out of thee (Bethlehem) shall come a Governor that shall rule my people Israel" (the Old Testament said). And so on. But we may pass now from these flimsy interpolations in the Gospels to consider the legend of the miraculous birth of a god in a much broader light.

CHAPTER II

CHRISTMAS BEFORE CHRIST

As I have said, there is no clue in the Gospels to the time of the year when Jesus is supposed to have been born: except, indeed, that it cannot have been midwinter, for that is the rainy season and shepherds would *not* be out at night. Even Jewish mothers cherish birthdays; but Miriam of Nazareth either forgot the date of that very wonderful day or omitted to mention it in her communication, late in life, of the remarkable story. Early Christendom found itself in the peculiar position of telling the world of the most tremendous birth there ever was on this planet and being quite unable to say when it happened. It was centuries before even the year could be determined; and then it was determined wrongly. Nobody now holds that Jesus was born in the year 1 A. D.

The result was that for several hundred years the various Churches celebrated the birthday of the Lord on different dates. The eastern Churches generally kept it on January 6th, which is now the Epiphany. Other Churches chose April 24th or 25th; and some placed it in May. It was not until 354 A. D. that the Church chose December 25th as the anniversary of the birthday of Christ. Rome was then the leading Church; and why Rome hesitated so long, and why in the middle of the fourth century (when it was, with imperial aid, try-

ing to bring in the whole Roman Empire) it had to choose December 25th, we must now see.

In order to realize it, to see how the rise of Christianity is a very human part of human evolution, let us imagine ourselves as members of the small and obscure group of Christians in Rome, say, in the fourth century. We have two poor meeting-places—one of them is a room above a small wine-shop—in the despised quarter of Rome beyond the river (the slope of the Vatican Hill) where criminals live and the dead are buried.

Mid-winter approaches and Rome is lit up with joy. It is the festival of the old vegetation-god Saturn who (as a god) died, or was displaced by Jupiter, the sky-god. But he has a fine temple on the Capitol, and his festival lasts seven days and is the most joyous time of the joyous Roman year. For one day slaves are free. They don the conical cap of the freed-man—as good Christians continue at Christmas to don such caps of paper, and hilarious Americans don them at festive dinners today—and sit at table while masters wait on them.

Stalls laden with presents line the streets near the Forum; and the great present of the season is a doll, of wax or terra-cotta. Hundreds of thousands of dolls lie on the stalls or in the arms of passers-by. Once, no doubt, human beings were sacrificed to Saturn, and, as man grew larger than his religion, as he constantly does, the god (or his priests) had to be content with effigies of men or maids, or dolls. Crowds fill the streets and raise fes-

tive cries. It was a time of peace on earth—for by Roman law no war could begin during the Saturnalia—and of good-will toward all men.

For a whole week, from December 17th to 24th, no work is done. The one law is good cheer, good nature. But the 25th also is a solemn festival, for it is marked in large type in the Roman calendar "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun."

Neither Romans nor Christians understood these things. The festival went back far into the mists of prehistoric times. It had been earlier a one-day festival, the feast of Saturn: a very important magico-religious festival for insuring the harvest of the next year, rejoicing that the year's work was over, and, no doubt, helping and propitiating the god of fecundity by generous indulgence in wine and love. Dimly, also, these people knew that the mysterious winter dying of the sun was arrested. It was on the turn. But only an accurate astronomy could decide which was the real day of the solstice, so they celebrated the 25th as the great day of the sun's rebirth.

We can well understand the anxious debates of these early Christians about the birthday of the Lord. Christ was the real sun that had risen upon the world. Why not boldly take "the birthday of the unconquered sun"? That would, incidentally, help to conciliate "the masses." But all this ribaldry and license and fooling Besides, there was another reason.

While the Christians gathered dingily in their two little back-rooms on the Vatican Hill,

there was another and more prosperous Asiatic religion housed on the same hill. Mithraism, as it was called, gave the Christians a very anxious time: not merely because it spread more rapidly, and was more respected, but because it was so strikingly like Christianity.

Mithra was an old Aryan sun-god, but, as I explain in *The World's Great Religions* (No. 1030), the reform of the Persian religion by Zarathustra had put the ethical deity Ahura Mazda so high above the old nature-gods that he was practically the one god. But Mithra stole upward, as gods do, and Persian kings of the fifth century B. C. put him on a level with Ahura Mazda.

Then the Persians conquered and blended with Babylon, and Mithra rose to the supreme position and became an intensely ethical deity. He was, like Aten, the sun of the world in the same sense as Christ. He was honored with the sacrifice of the pleasures of life, and was himself credited with no amours as Zeus was. Drastic asceticism and purity were demanded of his worshipers. They were baptized in blood. They practised the most severe auterities and fasts. They had a communion-supper of bread and wine. They worshiped Mithra in underground temples, or artificial caves, which blazed with the light of candles and reeked with incense.

And every year they celebrated the birthday of this god who had come, they said, to take away the sins of the world; and the day was December 25th. As that day approached, near midnight of the 24th, Christians might see the

stern devotees of Mithra going to their temple on the Vatican, and at midnight it would shine with joy and light. The Savior of the world was born. He had been born in a cave, like so many other sun-gods: and some of the apocryphal Gospels put the birth of Christ in a cave. He had had no earthly father. He was born to free men from sin, to redeem them.

F. Cumont, the great authority on Mithra, has laboriously collected for us all these details about the Persian religion, and more than one of the Christian Fathers refers nervously to the close parallel of the two religions. The Savior Mithra was in possession, had been in possession for ages, of December 25th as his birthday. He was the real "unconquered sun": a sun-god transformed into a spiritual god, with light as his emblem and purity his supreme command. What could the Christians do? Nothing, until they had the ear of the Emperors. Then they appropriated December 25th, and even bits of the Mithraic ritual; and they so zealously destroyed the traces of the Mithraic religion that one has to be a scholar to know anything about it.

The Saturnalia and "the birthday of the unconquered sun" and the birthday of Mithra were not all. A Roman writer of the fourth century, Macrobius, in a work called *Saturnalia* (i, 18), discusses the practice of representing the gods in the temples as of different ages. He says:

These differences of age refer to the sun, which seems to be a babe at the winter solstice, *as the Egyptians represent him in their temples on a cer-*

tain day: that being the shortest day, he is then supposed to be small and *an infant*.

And this is confirmed by, and receives very interesting additions from, a Christian writer, the author of the *Paschal Chronicle*. He says:

Jeremiah gave a sign to the Egyptian priests, saying that their idols would be destroyed by a *child-savior, born of a virgin and lying in a manger*. Wherefore they still worship as a goddess a virgin-mother, and adore an infant in a manger. (Col. 385 in the Migne edition, vol. XCII.)

The explanation is, of course, ludicrous. As I explain in the book of Egyptian religion, (Little Blue Book No. 1077), Horus, the deity in question, was a very old sun-god of the Egyptians. In the adjustment of the rival Egyptian gods, when the tribes were amalgamated in one kingdom, Horus was made the son of Osiris and Isis. The latter goddess was, as I said, the sister and the spouse (or lover) of Osiris; but whether we should speak of her as "a virgin mother" is a matter of words. In one Egyptian myth she was fecundated by Osiris in their mother's womb: in another and more popular, she was miraculously impregnated by contact with the phallus of the dead Osiris. Virginity in goddesses is a relative matter.

Whatever we make of the original myth, however, Isis seems to have been originally a virgin (or, perhaps, sexless) goddess, and in the later period of Egyptian religion she was again considered a virgin goddess, demanding very strict abstinences from her devotees. It

is at this period, apparently, that the birthday of Horus was annually celebrated, about December 25th. in the temples. As both Macrobius and the Christian writer say, a figure of Horus as a baby was laid in a manger, in a scenic reconstruction of a stable, and a statue of Isis was placed beside it. Horus was, in a sense, the Savior of mankind. He was their avenger against the powers of darkness; he was the light of the world. His birth-festival was a real Christmas before Christ.

In passing, we may recall that just such a spectacle is presented in every Roman Catholic church in the world on December 25th. Catholics will tell you that St. Francis of Assisi invented this tender and touching method of bringing home to men the humble birth of the redeemer. I know too much about Francis of Assisi to imagine that he had ever read the obscure *Paschal Chronicle*, in which I discovered this interesting passage some years ago. But certainly some other Christian writer had seen and reproduced it, and it had come to the knowledge of Francis. If a Catholic prefers to believe that Francis of Assisi did in reality conceive this method of representing the birth of Christ, he could not give us a better proof of the identity of the Christian and the Egyptian belief! The Catholic "crib" is an exact reproduction of the "show" exhibited in Egyptian temples centuries before Christ; and the Egyptian legend itself is thousands of years older than Jeremias. On the analogy of the Christian practice we may infer that the Egyptian legend described Isis as having given birth

to her divine son in a stable. In Alexandria there was a similar Greek celebration on December 25th of the birth of a divine son to Kore (the "virgin").

And this is not the end. The Greeks had a similar celebration. The general idea of a divine son being born in a cave was, as we shall see presently, common; or there were actually several scenic representations of the birth of these gods in their festivals. J. M. Robertson gives three in his *Christianity and Mythology* (p. 330). Hermes, the Logos (like Jesus in *John*), the messenger of the gods, son of Zeus and the virgin Maia, was born in a cave, and he performed extraordinary prodigies a few hours after birth. He was represented as a "child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Dionysos (or Bacchus) was similarly represented. The image of him as a babe was laid in a basket-cradle in the cave in which he was born. There is good reason to think that Mithra was figured in the same way.

We understand why the Church so long hesitated to put the birth of Christ at the winter solstice, and why there was no Scenic representation of the birth until Middle Ages. From end to end of the Roman Empire December 25th was the birthday of the unconquered sun, of the Savior Mithra, and of the divine Horus and they and the others I have mentioned, whose festivals were in other seasons, were represented almost exactly as the birth of Christ was described in the Gospels and is depicted in Catholic churches today.

And we must not overlook the Teutonic ele-

ment. Every Roman was familiar from childhood with the great mid-winter festival; and in the earlist days of the Christian era the religions of Persia and Egypt, with similar festivals, spread over the Empire. But the nations of the north also had their greatest festival of year in mid-winter. To these northern barbarians, shuddering in the snow-laden forests beyond the Danube, the return of the sun was the most desired event of the year; and they soon learned, approximately, the time—the winter solstice—when the “wheel” turned. The sun was figured as a fiery wheel; and as late as the nineteenth century there were parts of France where a straw wheel was set on fire and rolled down a hill, to give an augury of the next harvest.

Hence “Yule” (from the same old Teutonic word *hoel* or wheel) was the outstanding festival of the ancestors of the French and Germans, the English and Scandinavians. The sun was born; and fires (“Yule-logs,” such as are burned in British homes at Christmas today) flamed in the forest-villages, the huts were decorated with holly and evergreens, Yule trees were laden with presents, and stores of solid food and strong drink were lavishly opened. This lasted until Twelfth Day, now the Epiphany.

Thus almost the entire civilized world of more than two thousand years ago “had its Christmas before Christ. “The figure of Christ,” says Kalthoff, “is drawn in all its chief features before a line of the Gospels was written.” At least the figure of Jesus in what

is deemed its most captivating form was drawn in every feature long before it was presented in the Gospels. The first symbol of the Christian religion, the manger or basket-cradle of the divine child, the supposed unique exhortation to humility, was one of the most familiar religious emblems of the pagan world. Had it been exhibited to a crowd in one of the cosmopolitan cities of the Empire, it would have been strange or new to very few. One might pronounce it Horus, another Mithra, another Hermes, another Dionysos; but all would have shrugged their shoulders nonchalantly at the news that it was just another divine child in the great family of gods. The world flowed on. The names only were changed.

CHAPTER III

DIVINE SONS AND SAGES

It is difficult to keep a firm sense of proportion in studying such a question as that which now occupies us. We swim in a stream of myths that almost makes us dizzy. We find Christs and Christmases, virgin mothers and divine sons, stable births and persecuting monarchs, angelic annunciations and foster-fathers throughout nearly the whole religious world of two thousand years ago.

These things are now a settled part of our knowledge. The celebrations of the birthdays of Mithra and Horus are as certain as the Saturnalia. It is as certain that there were scores of legends of the miraculous birth of Gods, demi-gods, and heroes in the ancient world as it is that the Chaldeans knew astronomy and the Romans knew shorthand.

There is, therefore, a strong temptation to dissolve away the whole story of Jesus into mythical elements: to regard it merely as a mosaic made out of differently colored bits of marble from the quarries of the older religions. The sun-myth theory, in particular, is strained to explain all kinds of innocent-looking statements of the biography of Jesus in the Gospels. I explain elsewhere why I cannot follow these writers. The criticisms which Dr. F. C. Conybeare (a doctor of theology, yet an Agnostic, and a fine scholar) has too harshly directed at

them in his *Historical Christ* seem to me in substance justified.

But in that work (and his equally useful and judicious *Myth, Magic and Morals*, which also is really about the subject we are discussing) Dr. Conybeare makes one serious mistake. He knows well all the figures of history and mythology to which are attached these legends of supernatural birth and world-redeeming character. But are we to suppose, he asks, that the not very well educated writers of the Gospels knew these things? The objection certainly holds for some of the mythical elements which have been traced to Rome or India, and to obscure poetry and ritual. The writers of the Gospels were ill-educated Syrians or Greeks (I prefer to think, Greeks) whose acquaintance with comparative religion was limited. "Not too much zeal" is a good motto for mythologists.

But the chief mythical constituents of the life of Jesus were known all over the cosmopolitan Greco-Roman world: most particularly in that overlapping fringe of the Greco-Roman and the Persian-Egyptian worlds—the eastern coast of the Mediterranean—where the Gospels were certainly composed. Whatever city we may favor as the cradle of the Gospels, Alexandria or Antioch, Smyrna or Ephesus, every myth and ritual representation we have so far mentioned was familiar there: Mithraism spread from Persia to Britain. Roman soldiers prayed to Mithra in the towers in which they guarded the north of England from the maraud-

ing Scots. The religion of Isis and Horus was even more familiar round the Mediterranean. The legend and ritual of Dionysos were hardly less familiar.

And this is not yet half the story of the saturation, before the time of Jesus, of the Greco-Roman world with Christ-like myths. It is advisable first to lay the whole material, or as much of it as can be compressed here, before the reader, and then we may consider how it must affect belief in the story of Jesus.

I am mainly concerned in this volume with the legend of the virgin birth, but the death and resurrection legends were just as widely diffused. Now, in the face of the matter it may not seem necessary to appeal to any pagan beliefs to explain this Christian legend. The Septuagint (Greek) version of the Old Testament plainly (by a false translation) said, "A virgin shall conceive"; and this was referred to the Messiah. Moreover, the belief in the divinity of Christ, which very quickly developed, would of itself inspire the idea that the divine Jesus, who frowned on or despised conjugal relations, had not chosen to come into the world by that agency. But the world of the time was so steeped in myths of virgin births that the Gospel writers, or the early Christians in whose circles the Gospel stories developed, must have had many cases in mind.

The Jews themselves had the idea, and they got it from more than one source in the Old Testament. The classic text in Isaiah would, since the scattered Jews were more familiar

with Greek than Palestinian, and even in Palestine only learned Rabbis knew Hebrew, arouse a very widespread expectation that the Messiah was to be born of a virgin. Other births in the Old Testament were similarly interpreted. Thus Philo, commenting on the birth of a son to Thamar, says that she "saw not him who sowed," and cried, "Of no man is this [conception], by him [God] am I with child." It was a fiction of the Egyptians, with which the Jews were familiar, that a queen was impregnated by a god so that her son was divine. We saw that the messenger ("angel" is merely the Greek for messenger) of the Egyptian gods was fabled to come down each time and announce the event to a queen.

A stranger illustration of the spread of the idea through the Jews is found in the poet Virgil, who died fifteen years before Christ was born. Every educated Roman knew well the lines of one of Virgil's "Eclogues" in which (to translate the Latin) he says: "The Virgin returns, and the kingdom of Saturn also returns." The Golden Age was returning; and this mysterious mention of a virgin must mean that it was a son born of a virgin who would inaugurate it. Medieval Christians believed that a sort of revelation was made to the pagan Virgil in advance of the birth of Christ. But it is now thought that Virgil got the idea from some anonymous poems of the time called the "Sibylline Oracles," and these are ascribed to Jews in foreign lands. They expected the Messiah to be born of a virgin.

The Romans themselves were, in fact, quite familiar with the idea of a virgin birth. Not only had they received a score of such legends from Greece, as we shall see, but they had their own myths: quite apart from sons of the goddess Venus or of Jupiter. An Egyptian writer, Asclepiades, tells us of a Romand legend that the mother of Julius Caesar conceived her son miraculously in a temple. It was a trite way of making a monarch a "son of God."

But the Greeks were the most prolific of legends about virgin births. The modern Christian apologist captiously complains that, when Zeus visited this or that maiden, in the form of a swan, a bull, a shower of gold, or what not, the conception that followed cannot strictly be said to be virginal. We need not go into the anatomy and physiology of the process. To the Greeks and Romans the heroes thus engendered were born of "virgins." These modern apologists would do well to study the first of their class, Justin. Dr. Conybeare gives a series of quotations from his *Apologies* (in the middle of the second century) which it will be useful to reproduce here:

You [the Emperor] well know how many sons of Zeus your most renowned authors enumerate—Hermes, the interpreter, Word [Logos], and teacher of all; Asclepius, who ascended into heaven after being struck by lightning, although he was a healer; Dionysus, who was torn to pieces; Heracles [Hercules], who, escaped from toil, consigned himself to the fire; the Dioscuri born of Leda; and Perseus, born of Danae; and Bellerophon, who, though of human parentage, ascended on the horse Pegasus (Ch. XXI).

When I am told that Perseus was born of a virgin, I realize that here again is a case in which the serpent and deceiver has imitated our religion (297 B).

Even if we assert—and we do—that Jesus was born of a virgin, we contend that this too is a feature shared by him with Perseus. And when we tell you that Jesus healed the halt and paralytic, and the maimed from birth, and that he raised the dead, you will see that here too we merely repeat things said to have been done by Asclepius (Ch. XXII).

What we teach we learned from Christ and the prophets who preceded him, and it is a true lore and more ancient than that of all other writers that ever existed; but we claim acceptance, not because our stories are identical with those of others, but because they are true (Ch. XXIII).

Why are we Christians alone of men hated for Christ's name, when we do but relate of him stories similar to what the Greeks relate of Hermes and Perseus (Ch. XXIV)?

It is interesting to see how Justin reflects the perplexity of the early Christians over these resemblances. He wants to make a point of the fact that Christians teach only what others teach, yet he must prove that the Christian belief is true and the pagan false. His first "proof" is absurd. Like the other Christian Father, Firmicus Maternus, who also speaks very frankly about these pagan parallels, he holds that "the devil has his Christs": in other words, in order that the pagan nations should not at once accept the sublime story of the Gospels, the devil inspired them in advance with legends of virgin births and divine deaths and resurrections. It seems to have been the favorite theory.

But Justin has some doubt how far it will

count with the Stoic Emperor Antoninus Pius (who would smile at the idea of a devil), so he adds that the Christian story, or at least the Jewish foreshadowing of it, is the older. This, of course is preposterous. The legend of Isis and Horus is thousands of years older even than *Isaiah*; and, as we saw, *Isaiah* never said that a *virgin* would conceive. Even the legend of Hermes and Dionysos goes back to a period far earlier than the Messianic expectation. Moreover, if the Christian story is the older, how did the devil "anticipate" it?

The point of serious interest is that Justin very properly describes his Greco-Roman world as full of stories of divine sons who were born of *virgin* mothers. The question whether we should call them virgins from the modern physiological point of view does not matter in the least. To the pagan they were virgin mothers who had miraculously conceived. In fact, educated pagans, the "Modernists" of the old world, understood these things just as the Christian represented the conception of Jesus by Mary. Plutarch (*Convivial Disputations*) says on this point:

I see nothing absurd in the supposition that God, instead of approaching women in human wise, touches them to finer issues with other modes of contact, and so fills the mortal with divine offspring. The myth is not of my making, for the Egyptians say that Apis was thus conceived through touch and contact of Selene, the moon. The fact of the intercourse of a male god with mortal women is conceded by all.

The sacred bull's mother conceiving through a ray of divine light was actually copied by early

Christian writers and medieval artists. Tertulian (*Apologeticus*, 21) says that Mary conceived in that way; and we have medieval pictures illustrating it. Others said that Mary conceived through the ears. "Thou who didst conceive through the ears," an old Latin hymn says; and several Fathers say the same. It was an old superstition, found in the Talmud and all Jewish writers, that spirits (especially devils) could impregnate women through the ears. Hundreds of apologists have perspired over the saying of Paul (*I Corinthians* xi, 10), in ordering women to have their heads covered in church: "For this cause ought the women to have power on her head because of the angels." What is power? And what have the angels to do with a woman wearing her hat in church? The real meaning is clear as crystal. Woman must wear "a thing of power," a potent thing, a protection, over her ears to prevent the spirits from impregnating her. So women must wear hats in fashionable churches on Fifth Avenue today!

But we must not be tempted to wander over that world of weird and wonderful superstitions of two thousand years ago. No idea was more familiar than the impregnation of a woman by a deity; and, if she had been hitherto a virgin, she was held to be a virgin mother. Every Greek and Egyptian knew a score of such; and it was in the Greco-Egyptian world that the Christian legend evolved. Most prominent of all were the greatest of Egyptian goddesses, Isis, and the greatest of Greek goddesses, Cy-

bele. When at last the Church was forced to permit a veneration of a semi-divine mother, to compete with the most popular feature of pagan religion, statues of and hymns to Isis and Cybele were appropriated to Mary.

The "Madonna and Child," which Positivists are apt to think a distinctive Christian emblem, was, in fact, one of the most familiar of statues in that world. Demeter was sculptured suckling Dionysos; while Juno was similarly sculptured in Italy. Even Venus (a virgin), was often represented with a child. Kore (or Persephone—essentially a virgin) was represented, like Isis, with a divine son; and the birth was annually and dramatically celebrated. Cybele, the mother of the gods, was also named "the heavenly virgin." Ceres was figured on Athenian coins suckling a babe. Ino was figured with a child in her arms. Here (the Greek Juno) was represented in Rome suckling the babe Jupiter. From Babylonia to Rome the figure was so common, so typically pagan, that the early attempts to glorify Mary (as a substitute) caused schisms in the Church. J. M. Robertson (*Christianity and Mythology*, 167-70) gives a large number of cases.

The world was, as I said, saturated with the idea. Monarchs of special majesty, like those of Egypt, had to be popularly represented as conceived virginally. Julius Caesar and Alexander the Great had similar myths made about them. Apollonius of Tyana, the very remarkable counterpart and contemporary of Jesus, was credited with a miraculous birth, preceded

by a "star." King Cyrus of Persia was decorated with a miraculous birth. But perhaps the most curious and instructive case of all is that of the philosopher Plato.

The only life of Plato which we have was written five hundred years after his death, but the author quotes the authority of Plato's own nephew Speusippus and of a contemporary Athenian scholar for this story:

Ariston [married to Plato's mother] tried to constrain Periktione [the mother], who was a beautiful woman, but failed. When he ceased to do so, he had a vision in which Apollo appeared to him, and in consequence thereof guarded her pure of the relations of wedlock until she brought forth Plato.

Now, although this was written two centuries after the birth of Christ, no one questions that the pagan author, Diogenes Laertius, found his material in the pre-Christian sources which he quotes. And there is the whole story of Joseph's dream and Mary's conception told of the most famous of all philosophers, and told by his own nephew!

These things prove only how very natural it was for admirers to credit a particularly gifted being, much more a divine being, with a virgin birth. The Jews, you may think, had not this superstition about the indelicacy of conjugal intercourse; and I will conclude this chapter with the evidence that there was far more ascetic esteem of virginity in Judea in the time of Christ than is generally supposed.

A body known as the Essenes or Essenians lived an austere life in Judea, both in remote monasteries and in all the towns. Their most

characteristic tenet was that carnal intercourse was evil. Virginity was essential in an Essene. But this was only one of various bodies. While Josephus describes the Essenes, Philo describes a body known as the Therapeuts, in Alexandria and round the Mediterranean coast, to which many Jews belonged. They lived an austere communal life, and the women were all either virgins or widows.

And this, as we see clearly from Paul's constant reference to "virgins" and "sisters," and the disputes and scandals about them, spread through the Christian Church long before any virgin-birth myth appears. *I Corinthians* vii reflects the state of the Christian body by the middle of the first century. "It is better to marry than to burn," says the fanatical Puritan, but "to touch a woman" is a vile thing, and only commendable to weaklings. "About virgins" Paul has "no precept of the Lord," but "if anyone thinks he is behaving unseemly towards his virgin, if she is over the age of puberty, and it must be so, let him do what he wishes to." This sordid flesh is too much for some of us. The Lord kindly permits us to marry. That is Christianity before even *Mark*, who knows nothing of a virgin birth, is written. In the last decade of the first century *Revelation* (which belongs to that date) speaks, symbolically, of a vast crowd round the Lamb of men "which were not defiled with women, for they are virgins." The early Church seethed with a theoretical cult of virginity; so Jesus had to be born of a virgin.

CHAPTER IV

CHRIST AND KRISHNA

We may now pause to consider the moral, the suggestion, of this rich mythology of the old Jewish and pagan world. Had I the leisure and space of Sir J. G. Frazer, I might expand and arrange this material in a series of volumes which would show the human imagination developing the mythical forms of its religious ideas and passing gradually from pre-historic poetry to the dogmatic creed of the new religion. Here I must be content to summarize the facts and briefly indicate what seem to be the reasonable conclusions from them.

And the first consideration which, on a reasonable view, must occur to any impartial person is that, if the birth of an incarnate god had been annually celebrated for ages in the ancient world, and was celebrated particularly in the region where Christianity developed, it is not in the least likely that such a birth at last took place as an historical event. Setting aside religious sentiment, taking a purely human or historical view of the matter, there is a very strong presumption that the early Christians attributed to their savior the kind of birth that was ascribed to the deities of rival religions.

This presumption becomes a practical certainty when we recall how slowly the belief grew up in the Christian body, and how late it was. *Paul* knows nothing of it. *Mark*, which

on many grounds we know to be the oldest Gospel, knows nothing of it. *Matthew* in his original form knows nothing of it. *Luke*, the latest, has a long story about it. We reach something like the third decade of the second century before the story appears; though it must unquestionably have circulated in the Churches for some time before *Luke* could write it.

Whether, and to what extent, this belief about Christ was formed by absorbing the legends of the pagan religions is a more difficult question. In such matters we must try to put ourselves in the position of the men in whose minds the belief developed. I agree with Conybeare that the early Christians are not likely to have had such a knowledge of myths as Professor Drews supposes; but I differ emphatically from him when he contends that their knowledge was very scanty. It was not in Judea—it was not amongst Galilean peasants—that the belief in the miraculous birth arose; whatever we may think of the belief in the resurrection. It is too late. The belief obviously grew in the fringe of Greco-Roman-Egyptian cities round the eastern Mediterranean; and in those days it would hardly be possible for anybody to escape a knowledge of the annual celebration of the birth of Horus, Mithra, Dionysos, and other gods.

The real difficulty, which is often not appreciated by Rationalists, is to understand the frame of mind of men and women who, while regarding pagan religions as inventions of the devil, could borrow any mythical material from

them. Clerics would do better to use that argument, rather than ask people to believe the virgin birth because it is in *Luke*, when there is not a shred of evidence that it was in *Luke* before at least the end of the first century.

But we must not exaggerate this difficulty. Rome, when it forced Christianity upon Europe, deliberately adopted a very large amount of paganism. Bits of ritual, altars, statues, hymns, local deities, etc., were taken into the new religion. Does even the orthodox suppose that Jesus ordered the use of candles, incense, holy water, and vestments? Yet these things were fully adopted by the new religion.

It is really difficult to imagine the frame of mind of the early Christians. Perhaps the difficulty arises in large part from our practice of conceiving them as we have for ages been taught to do: as groups of men and women who met in severe isolation from all other cults and began an entirely new faith based only upon the words of Jesus. What I have already said about the Essenes and Therapeuts will help correct this; and in the last chapter I will give further facts which show how little novelty there was in the new congregations of Christians.

The truth is that we have very little historical knowledge of the Christians of the first century. Between the simple groups of Jesus-worshippers of Paul's *Epistles* and *Acts*, and the developed Christian doctrine of the second century, lies a whole world of evolution on which we have no positive light. The reasonable

view, for this part of the life of Jesus, seems to be that the influence of the Old Testament, the shape given by the Jews to the supposed Messianic prophecies, the natural impulse of ascetic believers to isolate Jesus from all sexual intercourse, *and* the broad beliefs of the Persians, Egyptians, and Greeks about the birth of their "saviors," co-operated in that obscure and loosely organized world to give shape to the traditional figure of Jesus.

However that may be, the comparative mythology of the virgin birth is extremely valuable as illustrating how naturally a body of believers in a god who has had human experiences come to think as the Christians thought about Jesus. The legends of Mithra, Horus, and Dionysos (and others) were presumably, developed quite independently. It does not follow that the Christian belief may have been evolved just as independently, because the Christians actually had these other legends under their eyes. But the rise in so many places of a belief in Christ-like gods most assuredly helps us to understand the evolution of the figure of Christ; and I will therefore add another chapter of illustration.

The Madonna and child may almost be said to be a world-wide religious emblem. It is familiar in China and Japan. It is found amongst the ruins of Babylonia and of Mexico. It was, as we saw, most common in ancient Italy, Greece, and Egypt. There is reason to believe that the Phoenicians had it; and it was certainly known to the north of Syria. The

explanation seems to me to be that the old mother-earth goddess, one of the first of the nature-deities, was united generally with two rival deities, who became husband and son; and human sentiment (especially feminine sentiment) everywhere gave this popularity to the more tender and appealing picture of the mother and divine child.

At all events, Asiatic religion had its Christs as well as the religions of nearer Asia and of Europe. The Shin Ho (Holy Mother) of the Chinese and Japanese is commonly represented with a divine son. Even Kong-fut-tse, who escaped the common fate of reformers—deification—was credited with supernatural portents at birth. It is a natural urge of the devout mind to invest its hero with superhuman experiences.

It is, however, in India chiefly that we find parallels. Buddha's teaching, as settled by modern scholars, was so decidedly non-religious that one would not expect him ever to be adorned with a supernatural halo. He not only plainly disavowed all the gods of India, but he bade his disciples waste no time in disputing about God and personal immortality. He was an Agnostic, a humanitarian. Yet, pure Buddhism almost perished from the earth. What is generally called Buddhism in Asia has no more relation to Buddha's teaching than Roman Catholicism has to the teaching of Jesus. It is a system of temples and statues, priests and monks, rosaries and censers, rites and vestments, heavens and hells.

In that atmosphere the figure of Buddha himself was bound to be degraded to the divine level: I say "degraded," because what would seem admirable and superior in Buddha and Jesus if they were men, becomes petty and trivial when one measures them by a divine standard. Here I am concerned only with the birth-stories. Christian apologists deny that there is any parallel with Jesus on the narrow ground that Buddha's mother, Maya, was married. The real parallel is that the later Buddhists would not have their deity born of carnal intercourse, and he was therefore said to be the outcome of a miraculous conception. Whether in such case we ought or ought not to call his mother a virgin is a matter of words. But Mr. Robertson shows from St. Jerome that the Buddhists themselves did call Maya "a virgin"—they believed in a "virgin birth"—and he rightly rejects the statement of Professor Rhys Davids that these Buddhists understood the birth of Buddha quite differently from the Christians because "before his descent into his mother's womb he was a *deva*." That is exactly what Christians say of Jesus.

In the very popular Hindu deity Krishna, however, we have, in many respects, a closer parallel to Christ. It is so close in some details that earlier scholars were tempted to think that these were derived from an early Christian mission to India. Modern scholars reject the idea, and they wonder only if some parts of the Christ and the Krishna legend did not come

from a common source: a source which some find in the legends about the Persian King Cyrus given by the Greek historian Herodotus.

The Hindu branch of the Hindu and Persian race, the eastern part of the Aryan race, lost in the luxuriant plains of India the severity of the older religion, and richly developed its phallic and sensual elements. In that world Buddhism failed, and the cult of Krishna gained in popularity until it appealed more than any other of the numerous religions of India. We have clear proof that the religion flourished in India two or three centuries before Christ; but whether there is any historical personage at the root of it, as in the case of Buddhism, we cannot say.

The orthodox legend of Krishna is that he was born of a married woman, Devaki; but like Maya, Buddha's mother, she was considered to have had a miraculous conception. We come nearer to the story of Jesus when we read that King Kansa was warned in a vision that the son of Devaki would destroy him, and take his place, and the child had at once to be taken away out of reach of the monarch. The king had Devaki's earlier children put to death ("murder of the innocents"), and Krishna had to be saved, as King Cyrus was saved from the King of the Medes and Moses from the King of Egypt. Krishna, moreover, gave signs of his real divine origin soon after his birth and in his boyhood. In the end Krishna—who is most un-Christlike in his amorous adventures among the milkmaids, which endear him to the un-

ascetic Hindu—killed King Kansa, took his place, and wrought marvelous things for his people.

Thus one of the familiar religious emblems of India was the statue of the virgin mother (as the Hindus repute her) Devaki and her divine son Krishna, an incarnation of the great god Vishnu. Christian writers have held that this model was borrowed from Christianity, but, as Mr. Robertson observes, the Hindus had far earlier been in communication with Egypt and were more likely to borrow the model of Isis and Horus. One does not see why they should borrow any model. In nearly all religions with a divine mother and son a very popular image was that of the divine infant at his mother's breast or in her arms.

Two more different conceptions of an incarnate deity than those of Christ and Krishna it would be difficult to imagine. Krishna is, in a sense, a patron, a model, of amorous adventure and, in his manhood, a great warrior. Jesus is the prophet of sin, the denouncer of love, the archetype of the pacifist. Yet worshipers far away on the plains of India came to conceive the appearance on earth of their deity much as the Christians of the first century conceived theirs. Neither borrowed from the other. Was there a common source in some of the older mythic material I have described, or shall we see here only a parallel evolution of the religious imagination playing about the birth of a God? Perhaps both; but the answer

does not concern me here. The Jesus-ideal is so far from unique that it is, on the contrary, one version of a legend which stretches over three thousand years of time and is found equally in Egypt and Syria, Greece and Rome. The stream of religious evolution flowed on.

CHAPTER V

THE GOSPEL MIRACLES

Elsewhere I prove that the record of miraculous experiences and accomplishments in the Gospels was written so many decades after the event that, on the ordinary principles of reason, common sense, and historical science, we cannot pay serious attention to it.

A religious reader will by this time have perceived what is the real difference between his position and ours. We examine the basis of his faith, and he does not. His preachers rhetorically talk about "infidelity" as a scarlet cloak of sin, a pretext for sensuality. He sees now what it really is. We are concerned that our opinions and professions shall be true, and we study minutely and thoroughly the foundations of them, the authority for them. The Gospels, as a biography of Jesus, cannot seriously be entertained.

To a properly informed person that would be sufficient. We might pass on to the next part of my program of inquiry: the establishment of Christianity in Europe and the effect upon Europe of its establishment. But we should then leave about the happenings of the first century an air of mystery in which faith might still find some slender sustenance. Not one Christian in a hundred thousand, not one Christian minister in a thousand, knows anything about Horus, Mithra, Dionysus, Attis, Cybele,

or Krishna; and only a few Christian scholars, who nurse their skepticism in secret, know the full facts, as I have given them. Yet they are facts as soundly established and universally accepted by experts as the facts of astronomy. They have, I hope, explained to the religious reader how little puzzled we are to understand this miraculous introduction to the life of Jesus which was at a late date interpolated in the Gospels.

When miraculous ending to the life, the portents of the crucifixion and the resurrection, are studied with equal thoroughness, the result is the same. The Greco-Roman world in which the Gospel stories took shape was so full of beliefs in slain and resurrected gods, even of annual pageants depicting them, that not even a little Christian girl in Alexandria or Ephesus, Athens or Rome, can have been ignorant of them.

With the intervening part of the life of Jesus I may deal briefly. If you analyze *Luke*, which is supposed to give us the most charming portrait of Jesus, you will see that it really contains very little but moral teaching and miracles. The moral teaching is a compilation of what we may almost call platitudes of the age. It will, no doubt, be equally surprising to the religious reader to hear that the miracles, especially the healing miracles, were platitudes of the age.

Let me first warn the religious reader that his preachers and writers commonly misrepresent Rationalists on this side. Some years ago

I had a debate in a London theater on "*Miracles*" against G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, and Cecil Chesterton. I stated the common position of the Rationalist. I do not in the least say that miracles are intrinsically impossible. I merely ask adequate evidence for the occurrence of them. Mr. Belloc was angry, because he was disappointed. I had, he said, dared to disavow Huxley—"one of the greatest of Englishmen," he calls him in the printed debate—and all the great Agnostics, as they held that miracles were impossible. Any person can verify for himself in Huxley's essays that he made no such statement. We do not deny miracles *a priori*: we examine the evidence. But preachers and religious writers find that they make a greater impression on their followers by representing that we deny the possibility of miracles. Very few Rationalists do that.

. The evidence for the miracles of Jesus is contained only in the Gospels. Paul tells of none. They begin in *Mark*: and the Gospel of *Mark*, the earliest, cannot be shown by any kind of evidence to have existed within half a century of the death of Jesus. Theological experts commonly say that a Gospel of *Mark* existed between 60 and 70 A. D.; but the popular writer who reproduces their opinion always omits to tell his readers that they do not mean the Gospel of *Mark* as we have it. Most of them mean *Mark* without the miracles. In any case, and on any hypothesis, the first witness you can quote to the miracles of Jesus is an

anonymous writer of the generation after the death of Jesus. Candidly, that is not serious evidence.

I do not propose therefore to take these cures and other remarkable events recorded in the Gospels and try to explain them away as natural events. The older type of Rationalist and liberal theologian used to do that. Some talked about the psychology of the crowd and its miracle-making enthusiasm; some spoke of ocular illusions; some even suggested that Jesus had learned magic or pious conjuring of the Egyptian priests (who, we know, were clever at it). It seems a waste of time. We have no reliable evidence that anything happened to Lazarus or the daughter of Jairus, or that there ever were such people. Some of the villages and places named in the Gospels seem to be imaginary. There is no other trace of the names.

It is more useful to describe how beliefs in such miracles grew up like mushrooms in the world of time. Various reasons are given why miracles were so commonly performed in earlier times and are now (when they are so badly needed to convince the world) never performed. These reasons seem to me hollow and thin. It is far more satisfactory to dwell on one very real and very well known difference between that age and ours. It is that in those days popular enthusiasm manufactured miracles by the thousand, in all religions and all countries. There were no "laws of nature." The divine or very gifted person did super-

natural things just as naturally as we make cakes.

The Jews themselves believed implicitly in healing and other miracles. The Protestant scorns the miracles of the Catholic saints and Mary, but he cannot say that miracles ceased when Jesus died simply because God left the earth. He believes that the prophets of the Old Testament worked miracles. Moses is said to have performed great wonders. The walls of Jericho (which, we now find, are still standing) were thrown down for Joshua, and the sun stood still. Elijah multiplied food, brought the widow's son back to life, and in the end ascended into heaven. The Old Testament is full of miracles; and the Jews of the time of Jesus were convinced that any prophet who was high in the favor of God would give signs and wonders. As, moreover, they had learned from the Babylonians that most illnesses were due to evil spirits (see *Morals in Ancient Babylon*, Little Blue Book No. 1076), healing became of itself a religious or miraculous act. The lunatic was universally supposed to have an evil spirit in him. The position of the believer, who now knows that spirits have nothing to do with insanity, yet believes the Gospels, is self-stultifying.

We must remember, too, that healing the sick was a specifically religious function in Judea quite apart from the belief in devils. One of the chief duties of the Essenes was to heal the sick; and in my opinion Jesus was an Essenian. Then there were the Therapeuts, whom I mentioned in a previous chapter; a re-

ligious fraternity and sisterhood that spread from Egypt. The name itself means "healers." Such people could be credited with anything. Even today most extraordinary stories of healing or apparitions reach the papers from rural districts, and the first reporter who goes down returns with the stereotyped result: "Nothing in it." In the days of Jesus the whole of Judea was more credulous and gossipy than a rural district today; yet Roman Catholics of Boston and New York will tell you that miracles are demonstrated at Lourdes in our own day!

And not the whole of Judea only was so credulous, but the whole world. If the followers of Jesus had not been able to say that he had worked miracles, his position as a god would have been very low in the pantheon of the time. The mass of the people had no idea of a pure spirit. The gods had human members, and they or their messengers (angels) visited the earth at any time. Even the Stoic philosophers held that, if there were gods, they were material. Plutarch thought that "the stuff of which gods are made is air and spirit and certain forms of warmth and moisture."

Nearly every Greek and Roman god had, therefore, an earthly record. The labors of Hercules were miracles of the physical order. Asclepios (or Aesculapius) was, however, the Christ of the pagan world in this respect: the pagans even taunted the Christians with stealing his adventures for their Jesus.

In the earliest Greek writers Asclepios is a human being, a healer of remarkable power, deified later by the gratitude of mortals. The

legend grew up that he was of divine origin, though mortal birth; and that he went about amongst men healing the sick and raising the dead to life. He, in fact, raised so many dead to life that the god of the lower world, Pluto, feared that his population would run short, and he had Asclepios destroyed. He became one of the most popular gods of the Greeks and Romans. His temples were centers of free treatment for the sick, and sculptors represented him as a young and handsome man.

A nearer parallel to Jesus is Apollonius of Tyana, who was almost a contemporary. His life was written about a hundred years after his death, by Philostratus, and is therefore no more reliable than the Gospels. In fact, precisely in its unreliability and its legends it is a perfect parallel. What we may, in fact, must, believe from it is that Apollonius was a wandering moralist of the time, a disciple of the Greek Pythagoras; and that he went about the Greco-Roman world with a body of disciples. It is said that he even reached India, to learn the wisdom of the Brahmans.

Pagan writers especially taunted Christians with borrowing from the life of Apollonius, or said that Apollonius was superior to Jesus in his teaching and miracles. His birth was announced in advance by a messenger of the gods, who told the mother to go to a meadow to be delivered. A meteorite appeared in the sky as a portent of the birth. He drove the devils out of the insane and sick, and he raised the dead to life. One such miracle is closely parallel to the raising of the daughter of

Jairus. Apollonius was called to the house of a Roman of distinction—in the Gospels Jairus is “a certain ruler,” then a ruler of the synagogue—and he raised his daughter to life. There is in this case good ground to believe that the story was actually transferred from Apollonius to Jesus. Apollonius himself rose from the dead and appeared and talked to a disciple; and he ascended into heaven. Temples were then erected in honor of him, prayer and sacrifice were offered to him, and miracles were wrought by relics of him.

This story of Apollonius was known throughout the Greco-Roman world. He had traveled at least from Rome to Babylon, with a band of disciples, and had been treated in most places as a prophet of great distinction. The biography of him is late, but it quotes earlier lives from which it copies. As he died just about the time when the Gospels were taking their present form, or before they had taken their present form, one wonders what influence his story may have had. Such questions we cannot answer. It is enough that the world of the time was quite familiar with the idea of a miracle-working prophet. The Emperor Alexander Severus had busts of both Apollonius and Jesus in his private chapel. But Apollonius seems to have no apostle Paul, and so no religion grew out of his memory.

The truth is that “miracles” then surprised nobody. The word means “a wonderful thing,” and it surprised none that prophets of a more than ordinary communion with the gods should

do such things. Pagans did not so much disbelieve that Jesus had done these things as say that it no more proved him to be a god than it proved Apollonius to be a god.

We need not, therefore, go into a detailed consideration of the miracles ascribed to Jesus. The mythologists trace many of them to various sources, but their work is often strained, and it is not necessary for my purpose to follow it. If we seek sources we have, in the case of the raising of the dead to life, either the Old Testament or Asclepios or Apollonius. But do we need any? The details correspond closely enough in the case of the daughter of Jairus to suggest borrowing, but as a rule the human impulse that begot one miracle could easily beget another. I have shown elsewhere how just such a crop of miracles grew, in the full light of the nineteenth century, in a single generation, about the memory of the Persian reformer, Muhammed Ali, the Bab. What was possible in the nineteenth century was easy in the first; and the Bebaists of the nineteenth century were just as virtuous as the early Christians. The faith in the miracles of Jesus is no miracle. It would, in the circumstances, border on the miraculous if such a faith had not arisen.

CHAPTER VI

PAGAN CHRISTIANS

I have said that we have so little reliable historical knowledge of the Christians of the first century that it is very difficult for us to reconstruct the psychological conditions in which the creed about Jesus evolved. As far as his sayings are concerned we have little difficulty. We have seen that nothing was thought in those days of putting a false name to what one wrote. We now speak of a man "publishing" a book, and this, apart from the modern development of criticism, carries with it a certain responsibility. One had no such responsibility in the first century. Philostratus wrote the life of Apollonius at the bidding of the Empress, but as a rule a man just wrote down what he pleased and lent the manuscript to his neighbors for their entertainment or edification.

The material of the Gospels, however, was, as *Luke* intimates, gossip circulating in the churches. Roman Catholics sometimes persuade themselves that our security for the accuracy of the Gospels is the Church. They have a vague idea that there was a sort of Vatican authority keeping an eagle eye on the writings which circulated and the things which were said in the churches. The Church saw to it, they say, that the record of the sayings and doings of Jesus was preserved in its purity.

This is an absurd anachronism. There was no Church, there was no record, for many decades after the death of Jesus. To take the most orthodox view of Paul's Epistles, they exhibit to us the life of the churches—very inadequately, but very faithfully—twenty to thirty years after the death. There is no common authority, and the groups are full of dissensions and uncertainties. There is no record whatever for Paul to appeal to when he differs from Peter and the others. All through the Epistles he lets us know that the other Christian leaders who visit the various groups and preach to them differ very considerably from himself; and he never appeals to any record of the saying of the Lord to prove his own view. He knows it all by a personal revelation. And it is limited. He had "no precept" on a burning question like virgins. He shows plainly that Jesus had given them no decision about matters like circumcision, sacrifice, and forbidden foods, which fiercely agitate them. Many questions of doctrine are just as disputed. There is quite obviously no written record to appeal to.

The early development of Spiritualism in the United States, about the middle of the last century, helps us a little to understand the situation. Stories of miracles went from group to group. When at last a written record was made, it contained hundreds of stories so obviously incredible that one has to go back to the literature of 1870 to read them. There was an epidemic of credulity, of miracle-making enthusiasm. Writers did not sit down and

compose legends or borrow stories from other sources. The report slowly spread, from mouth to mouth, say from Boston to Philadelphia, of something that had happened; and it grew like a snowball. This goes on still. In my debate with Sir A. Conan Doyle, that champion of Spiritualism gave a quite incorrect version of D. D. Home passing from one window to another in London. And this was nothing to Lombroso, who wrote for the Italian public that Home was seen floating in the air all round a certain mansion in London! Lombroso had never read anything of the sort, yet he was one of the most honest and honorable of men.

The Oriental atmosphere of two thousand years ago was far more favorable to this picturesque growth of stories as they passed from place to place. We need accuse no one of dishonesty, of fabrication, of deliberate borrowing and falsifying. We assume only what the universal and eternal experience of the race entitles us to assume. That and the equally common tendency of the time to write for edification, not as a mere record of facts, suffice to explain the Gospels. As to control by a "Church," the truth is that all sorts of fantastic Gospels were in circulation. Our four were selected at a much later date.

But we have to explain the Christian groups themselves. Here the modern Persian movement Behaism, the reforming religion of the Bab, is again most relevant. One man who set out to reform the Mohammedan religion founded a new religion. He had in mind part-

ly the reforming work of Jesus. Possibly he had read also some modern critical literature. He was, in any case, a man of high and pure ideals. And, when he was executed after a very few years preaching, he left behind a body of intensely devoted followers, men who could smile at death though they hoped for no heaven. He founded a new religion; and that religion had "thousands of followers" in the distant United States, the Cambridge Professor of Arabic, E. G. Browne, tells us, half a century after the death of the Bab. In Persia itself, Professor Browne says, the religion had every prospect (in 1903) of superseding Moham-medanism.

Such things are not mentioned in religious literature. The fiction is sustained that only a divine power explains the spread of Christianity. The believer is encouraged to think that bodies of men and women, Christian communities, with entirely new and higher ideals arose in Judea and spread over the world.

I have already given some evidence of the complete falseness of the view. The Essenes, for instance, whose ways and ideals I fully describe in *The Sources of Christian Morality*. (Little Blue Book No 1095), were Christians before Christ. Their voluntary poverty, austerities, altruism, and purely spiritual worship of God, put them exactly on a level with the best Christians. Probably many of them "accepted Christ." It meant nothing like a revolution. All that they would do would be to think henceforth of Jesus as a model Essene, to celebrate

a supper in his memory. The resurrection, Paul clearly shows, was disputed.

Next we have the Therapeuts, a body composed indifferently from Jews and pagan converts. Their headquarters were in Alexandria, but they spread from city to city along the coast. They lived in communities. Men and women had separate sleeping places, but met on certain days for sacramental suppers, with bread and water instead of bread and wine. Flesh and wine were forbidden, and dress was of the simplest. They strongly opposed slavery.

While the Essenes generally devoted themselves to an active and philanthropic life, the Therapeuts were absorbed in prayer and contemplation. They were celibate and ascetic: were, in fact, monks and nuns in so real a sense that some religious writers have contended that the work describing them is not by Philo, but by a Christian, who is trying to get admiration for the Christian communities by this pious fiction! Their resemblances to the Essenes, who are far older than Christianity, make a theory of this kind ridiculous. They seem rather to mingle the ascetic and spiritual ideas of Pythagoras with the later Jewish ideas of the stricter school. The Essene ideas seem to me rather a mixture of Persian and Hebrew ideas. It was, as we have often seen, a world of wonderful overlapping and blending of cultures.

A. Kalthoff, a liberal German pastor whose book I translated, gives us a most interesting summary of the state of the Greco-Roman

world at the time (*The Rise of Christianity*, 1907). This is often said to be "the preparation of the world for Christianity," but the expression is too weak. There was nothing new in the world nineteen hundred years ago except Jesus; and he was only one of a group of Christs, or austere popular moralists and reformers. The ideas, the practices, the grouping were there before Jesus, all over the world. The first century before Christ, which ill-educated preachers are wont to call "the darkest hour before the dawn," was, on the contrary, a century of religious revival, of remarkable asceticism, of semi-secret gatherings and fraternities, of intense spiritual cults. It was Christianity before Christ.

I have already said enough about this movement in Egypt (where it leads to a purified cult of Isis, to the religion of Serapis, and to the Therapeuts), and in Judea itself, and in Persia (which gives the world the austere religions of the Mithraists and the Manichees). There was a similar spiritual and ascetic movement in old Babylonia. In the west the Greeks, whom we are so apt to regard as merely frivolous and sensual, gave similar movements to the world.

There were two roots of this remarkable movement which I call pre-Christian Christianity, in the Greek world. One was the growth of trade guilds as trade unions, such as I describe in *Life and Morals in Greece and Rome* (Little Blue Book No. 1078): the other was a revival of the "mysteries" (Eleusinian, Orphic, Dionysiac, etc.), of which also I give some ac-

count. The trade guild (*eranos*) was a union for much the same purposes as in modern times, but it had a religious complexion. There was always an altar in the meeting-place, and each center had its special divine patron. At Rhodes, for instance, the members of a center were known as the Soteriastae, because their patron was Zeus Soter: that is to say, "Zeus (or Jupiter) the Savior." Other centers took Hercules, Dionysos, Apollo, and other gods.

Slaves and women were admitted on an equal footing: it is sheer bunk that the Christian groups were the first to do this. In the Greek *eranoi* women had even the right to speak when they chose. One of the chief events in the life of the fraternity was the periodical supper. Members either brought their food or made up a common fund to pay for it. Naturally, in the part of that world the chief items were bread and wine. On more than one day even in modern Greece I have been able to buy nothing else, except a little cheese. The patron deity was known as "the Lord" (*kurios*), and the chief meeting each month was "the Lord's meeting," when hymns were sung to the god. In one association the supper took the form of a commemoration (of heroes). In other associations certain abstinences were required, and baptism figured amongst the rites of initiation. Candidates for admission were very rigorously examined. Hospitality was found for members of foreign associations, the poor were assisted, and there was a burial fund.

In lectures on Greece and Rome I have found

the modern workers astonished to hear of these trade unions of long ago, and I fancy the orthodox Christian will be not less astonished. He may, as usual, suspect that these are "guesses." He has not the least consciousness of the extreme weakness of his own position in regard to belief in Jesus, but is ready to accuse the most conscientious scholars of "merely guessing." But these facts are known from contemporary documents, not documents a century after the event (like the Gospels). Kalthoff, especially in his fifth chapter, gives the authorities for them.

The *eranoi* were real pre-Christian centers, and the religious revival of the first century before Christ intensified their religious character. Every city of the Greco-Roman world had, therefore, not only moralists with teaching exactly the same as that of Jesus, not only religions with annual celebrations of the humble birth of a savior-god and of the death and resurrection of a god, but hundreds of nightly gatherings or conventicles of a Christian kind: real fraternity of members, common suppers, common funds, hymns to "the Lord," initiation ceremonies (including baptism), and so on. Then besides these were the evening services of the austere Mithraists and Manichees, the centers in which the "mysteries" were celebrated, the temples of Isis, Serapis, Sabazios, Aesculapius, and so on. What element of novelty did Christianity bring except the name Christ? And it is not even a personal name. It means merely "the anointed one."

Paul found all this material ready to build

into his structure; or, rather, he built nothing, but merely got them to alter the name of the church, so to say. "Church" means "the Lord's house"; and, as the patron deity of an *eranos* was commonly spoken of as the Lord, and the more ceremonious assembly as "the Lord's assembly," we should expect the room to be "the Lord's house." Paul, a tent-maker, was most probably a member of an *eranos*, and he, as such, had the right of hospitality in brother associations at Ephesus and Corinth and elsewhere. In them he found groups of artisans and women with rebellious sentiments about the existing social order and skeptical sentiments about the official deities (Zeus, Aphrodite, etc.), whom the philosophers derided. He had to persuade them to adopt Jesus as "the Lord," or gather a convert in the clubs here and there and form a small new center with them. Christianity was founded. How much did the nightly gatherings differ from what they had been before?

In form not much, the religious writer may tell you, but in spirit, in message.... Mr. McCabe does not appreciate the tremendous importance of the sense of Sin, you may be told, so he naturally does not appreciate the real newness of the new religion.

It is true that I do not see any importance or use in this famous sense of Sin. The man who hurts his brother or sister is immoral. That is my simple philosophy. Sin is an offense against God; and there is no God. And if anyone tells me that, though no injury be actually done to anybody, there is Sin in this

girl—I recall a little picture in a great American hotel—who sits in a corner of the lounge with almost exposed breasts and flesh-colored silk stockings and dress hardly covering her knees, deliberately stirring the pulse of the youth who sits opposite her, I reply that there is, in my opinion, far more Sin in the sour church-going matron who glares at her and would squeeze the world into the narrow mould of her creed. But the main point is that even in this respect Jesus (or Paul) brought nothing new into the world. I close with a passage from Erwin Rohde's *Psyche*, a dispassionate survey of that ancient Greco-Roman world by one who knew it thoroughly:

From the end of the second century there is a pronounced religious reaction, and it grows more and more with the course of time. Philosophy itself becomes a religion, fed by aspiration and revelation. The soul no longer looks proudly and calmly on what may lie behind the veil of death; life seems to demand a complement elsewhere; the hoary world seems to have no possibility of growing young again on this earth. So with redoubled ardor hope flings itself with closed eyes into the new existence that is hid beyond the known and knowable world of the living. The soul is filled with hope and desire, but also with anxiety, in face of the dread secrets of death. At no other period was the belief in the immortal life of the soul so ardently and anxiously expressed as in these days when the older civilization was passing away. . . . There was a revival of the ancient and venerable mysteries of Eleusis, which were celebrated until near the close of the fourth century. Orphic conventicles must have assembled for a long time; and the Hellenized east had many similar orgies. Foreign religions pressed into Greece owing to the mingling with eastern races, and had more success than the old Greek cults. Stringent orders, the

rigid reserve of sacred knowledge, *aversion from the world and its pleasures, ceremonial purification and sanctification, penance and asceticism*, were more widespread in the east than in Greece. By these means they prepared the believers for the highest they could present to them—*a life of eternal happiness, far from this unclean world, in the kingdom of the holy and of those consecrated to God*. The Egyptian religion spreads more and more down to the last days of the ancient faith; and with it spread the Syrian or Phrygio-Thracian cult of Sabazios, of Attis, and of Cybele, and the Persian religion of Mithra. Obscure mysteries and symbolic rites work on the popular imagination, and prepare it for a belief in magical influence. Even the higher culture of the time, degenerating into credulity and miracle-seeking, came at length to share in these purificatory rites, which had at first been confined to the lower classes of the population. The most cultivated men of the time reconciled themselves to all that was mysterious and incomprehensible, even in its most sensuous dress. The newly awakened religious feeling of the people had been accompanied by a return of philosophy to Plato and his religious speculations. Neo-Platonic speculation fills the last centuries of Greek intellectual life. It preaches *a renunciation of natural life and absorption in the spiritual life beyond*.

That was the world just before Christ. Then Christ appeared; and the life of the world merely flowed on.

